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ABSTRACT

Presuming that the innovative process should begin at the point at which a need for change coincides with the means of satisfying that need, the English teacher can update his instructional approach by examining, on the one hand, the student's felt need for articulate expression and a sympathetic listener, and on the other, the current advanced research in counseling, programed instruction, and the human use of language. For example, language research in generative grammar can be used as a basis for providing the student with a "descriptive consciousness" of the way components are taken apart; literature can be viewed as an object to be used to enhance one's articulation through allusion or quotation; and composition can be an activity to develop the writer's natural ability to speak with a unique voice on his chosen subject. The teacher would become a trained counselor who listens and then prescribes specific books, exercises, and programed texts to meet each student's individual needs. (JB)

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HERE IS AN ANSWER to the old question "Why study English?" It is not the kind of formula answer we can give to students, but it is one that we may consider using ourselves.

The Locus Of Change: Some Notes on Innovation in English Teaching

ROBERT OLIPHANT, *San Fernando Valley State College*

"English" is a well-documented word in our pedagogical lexicon: in frequency of use, I would judge, it yields primacy only to that fictitious entity which we label "The Student." For a considerable portion of his educational life, The Student—whoever he is—studies English—whatever *it* is; and most of us feel that as the archetypal humanity, English is still a proper study. If anything, we would like to make it more proper: we want to sharpen its outlines, heighten its impact. Following the mathematicians and the physicists, we feel we are ready for some Big Changes, and we accordingly look with favor upon ingenious projectors and attractive programs of innovation.

I have no program of innovation to present to you, but I do have some ideas about where we might look. As a phenomenon—historical and contemporary—innovation is itself something we can look at, something we can talk about. The historian Carl Schorske has suggested that we can profitably talk about innovation as the end result of two converging forces. One of these, he suggests, is the nature of the "felt need" for change; the other is the nature of "advanced research" relevant to the meeting of that felt need. In scientific instruction, for example, we could talk about innovation as the intersection of a felt need (post-Sputnik dissatisfaction with school mathematics and physics) with relevant advanced research (set theory, logic, etc.). In English, we might be able to talk about innovation in the same way, using these two vectors to locate the point of intersection where change will be desirable and possible.

We can of course talk about the nature of our felt need for change in a number of ways: the need of our young people for expression, their need for a sense of relevance in their studies, their need for recognition—these labels come fairly close in assessing a rather serious educational and social situation. As labels, they certainly are more on target than our voicing of mild dissatisfaction with the quality of contemporary spelling and usage. These labels, however, do not really serve to define a "felt need" of society, taken as a whole: as an adult, my response to them is generally, "ain't that too bad, kiddies," for as an adult I can fairly say

that I need these things too, and that I would prefer to spend my time and my money on myself and on changes that would affect me more directly.

I am wrong, of course. The essential difference between them and me is that they *need* changes much more than I do, and that—more important—they will continue to cause *trouble* for me until something is done about it. This unmannerly recalcitrance on their part insures that their problem is now my problem—and by extension A Serious Problem of Contemporary Society. Emblematic of what I am trying to say here is an incident attendant upon the Watts riot: during the first day of that disturbance, I watched a film on TV of a meeting in which various Negroes got up and spoke their piece. One of them was a small sixteen year old boy, hopping mad at Whitey and—more to the point—inarticulate and obviously ignored by the Amos and Andy-Kingfish ministers and social workers there. During the next few days, I am sure that little boy caused a lot of damage; he may even have killed someone, and that indeed constitutes a Serious Problem. If I may, I would like to label our "felt need" with more violent words: many of our young people are saying today, with various degrees of circumspection, "Listen to me, dammit, or I'll burn your lousy old house down." As a taxpayer, I would prefer to listen, given these alternatives; and as an English teacher, I think it is my job to help that little assassin learn to speak.

In our search for a proper intersection, let us turn to our other factor, "advanced research." While it might be possible to legislate new research to meet our felt need, our sense of responsibility and natural thrift ought to impel us to look around for something already there and moving. If we look around the field of contemporary literary scholarship, we are apt to find very little, in my view. However, "English" encompasses much more than the study of literary figures and movements: as a "field" it deals with what Norbert Weiner might call "the human use of human language," and as such a wide field "English" is fair game for the linguist, and social psychologist, the psychologist of verbal behavior, and the psychiatrist. In what we persist in calling behavioral science, there seems to be a lot there and moving—much of it in very exciting directions. Some of this research, in my opinion, leads toward our point of intersection.

Much of the recent work in generative grammar, programmed instruction, and "reality" therapy may seem at first glance rather far removed from the felt needs of our little assassin. But I believe that the general direction of this work comes gratifyingly close, and I suspect that as English teachers we might find this general direction amenable

to our interests and competence. As research, it seems to me—particularly in grammar—to be very much concerned with the description of complex structural relations and very much concerned with the language of description. If one takes away all the algebra, all the statistics, and all the "models," "systems," and "theories," one is left with a very acceptable behavioral position of what might be called "descriptive consciousness." We can label this general direction, I feel, with comfortable words: "this is the way we take it apart, and this is the way we talk about taking it apart." As an English teacher I find these words very comfortable, for they describe pretty well what I try to do; and they suggest to me something of what might be done, were I to discard a few of my disciplinary assumptions, replacing them with assumptions directed toward our desired intersection between felt need and advanced research.

If I assume that a poem is an object, rather than an assigned, putatively enhancing "experience," then I am led to look for *uses* to which that object may be put. Let us consider some possible uses then: plagiarism, recitation, partial quotation (i.e. lines and phrases), allusion, parody, imitation—all of these seem to me to embody "uses" of the original work. It further seems to me that the actual behavior of fluent people palpably exhibits uses of this sort (excluding the first of course). Behind every speech, behind every essay, behind every witty conversation, lies a possible *Road to Xanadu,* tracking down sources and charting their uses. I am not trying to suggest here that we should tape record our conversations and turn them over to a future John Livingstone Lowes, but I would argue that we differ from our students largely in the extent to which we use what we read. Our cult of Original Wit makes us reluctant to discuss or preach the virtues of this cannabilistic process, and our pedagoy is certainly characterized by this reluctance. One might defensibly paraphrase Einstein here (another sort of "use"): "I would advise you to pay attention to what Humanists *do,* rather than to what they say." If what we do—as I have argued—is to *use* what we read, then I would submit that we are justified in attempting to make a poem "usable" for students.

If we assume that recitation is a proper use, then some of our Advanced Research may be relevant, programmed instruction to be specific. I do not think that we can teach "understanding" or "appreciation" via a sequence of 100 baby steps, as John Ciardi has tried to do, but it can certainly be demonstrated that a student can memorize a poem and retain it in such a "take-it-apart" sequence. Heretofore, we have of course felt memorizing to be a tedious chore of little consequence. However, if we assume that recitation is a proper use, and if we grant memorizing as a necessary step for recitation, and if our Advanced Research can make

this chore less tedious, then our assumption enables us to make use of Advanced Research. There are some hazards here. I would not want to turn my students over to a programmed marriage of B. F. Skinner and Cleanth Brooks, and I would be appalled at the spectacle of a semi-literate psycho-sociologist reorganizing our curriculum and our assumptions. But I am on the other hand not particularly in love with our present assumptions, and I feel that an assumption of Literary Usability might permit us to turn some of our Advanced Research toward giving my little Watts Assassin a modest repertoire of Shakespearean Quips and Retorts.

Turning from Literature to Composition, I may find it profitable to assume that Composition is an activity rather than a subject. As an activity, it would be inseparable from the actor, or writer, and this inseparability would require that I deal with each writer as a unique voice, speaking on a unique subject. My job, then would be to let him speak, to let myself listen, and to initiate and sustain a process of expression, re-examination, and growth in the uses of natural language. Here I think I am coming rather close to our Felt Need, and here I think there is a little Advanced Research available to help me meet that Felt Need. As I understand it, views of personality are moving away from a concern with Awareness to concern with Function, and my own urge is to translate much of this Szasz-Maslow talk about Creativity and Reality-Defence into a workable setting for composition—not a group setting, but an individual quasi-clinical setting. I do not think that I will be able to transform our little assassin into a James Baldwin, but I believe I could help him to burn up a piece of paper, rather than a liquor store.

This last may seem conjectural, so I feel I should offer an example. Fortunately, I have one. Last year I spent ten one-hour sessions with a jazz musician, an older man who had started to write his memoirs and who had found this difficult. We started out with a sort of "as told to Gerald Frank's tape recorder" format, but I soon found that my musician could do his own writing, if I raised the proper questions and let his mind play with what was there. He had much to say—as have all of us—and I feel that our sessions helped him to discover what it was and how to go about it. The results were well worth those ten hours: the pieces he did became progressively more brilliant, more genuine. He published some of them, and, more importantly, be continues to write and to publish. I don't have the terms to talk about what went on in those sessions and in him, but I supect that Advanced Research offers those terms and a format in which to achieve some modestly enhancing results for our students and our assassins.

What I am trying to point to when I use the term "Advanced Research" encompasses, of course, much more than programmed instruction and counseling techniques: children's verbal behaviour, speech pathology, group dynamics, even such roccoco phenomena as General Semantics and "bibliotheraphy"—all these might yield rewards in the direction of our desired point of intersection. I believe, however, that this discussion is a step toward locating that point; for it attempts to define our Felt Need as a specific need of a specific human being, and it suggests that our Advanced Research offers us effective techniques (programmed instruction and counseling) for meeting this sort of Felt Need. Here is our point of intersection, and here is where we ought to go to work.

The picture of an English Teacher implied here is, I must confess, a different sort of picture from our conventional ideal of the brilliant classroom performer or the "tough" grader of themes: it is a picture of a man who does not give speeches or lectures, a man who does not really talk very much. Rather, he is a man who listens, and armed with his sensitivity to language then prescribes a book, an exercise, a programmed text. As a taxpayer, given this as our point of intersection, I would have to ask "what would this man's time cost me and how much actual good could he do?" These are fair questions and embarrassing ones. I am not sure they can be answered within our conventional framework of curriculum and credits.

A partial answer lies in our present dissertation-advisor format. Here there exists, located in a conventional academic setting, a one-to-one relationship of the kind I am trying to describe. In my own training, this relationship was far more fruitful than any course, any seminar, any book. In terms of his time, it was not unduly expensive: a few conferences, a few drinks, a few letters, a large number of corrections and suggestions on the final draft—that about sums it up. In terms of the actual good done, we would have to ask a future accountant-bibliographer to compute the net social gain in a process which translates a piano player into a philologist. It would not be a difficult computation, really: one could take income tax returns for a ten year period, extract the amount of income tax paid fairly assessable against this process, multiply by a "publication factor," then multiply again by a factor to account for "social damage avoided by this process." On the basis of such a computation, I would judge my advisor to be underpaid, and I would suspect that such a one-to-one relationship would thus be defensible in the judgment of the accounts currently charged with responsibility for our universities and our society.

I am not advocating that our Watts Assassin should be asked to write a dissertation on "Lady Meed and Thanatos: the Development and

Destruction of the American Supermarket." But I would argue that the kind of one-to-one relationship I have described is a defensible locus of intellectual growth. Given responsible application of counseling techniques and programmed instruction, such a locus would qualify as a practical intersection of Felt Need and Advanced Research. I offer this not as a program of innovation, but as an example of how we might profitably talk about change and where we might look for attractive possibilities.

Those possibilities, I suspect, are somewhat circumscribed by the structure of educational institutions: our preesnt framework of courses and credits may not permit the kind of intersection I have exemplified. In that event, we might have to place our man who listens in another framework—or change the framework we have. I hope we will be able to use this man and the changes which he represents. He could be our English teacher of tomorrow: a man who helps Society with Its Prose.